

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY

Lili Fabilli and Eric Hoffer Essay Prize 2010-11 Topic: The End of Civility

First Place: Shareena Samson

Second Place: Patricia Argueza, Jing "Jonathan" Wong, Alina Xu

First Place

Shareena Samson

I am sorry to report that Civility passed on early this month. I am sure this is surprising news for most of you. You are, no doubt, presently asking "Didn't he die years ago?" Indeed, that he survived at all after slipping on dog droppings in his own front lawn a decade ago was a miracle in itself. Who would have thought that months later he would be forgiving his ill-mannered and thoughtless neighbor for not picking up after his dog's business and rehabilitating his brittle, broken hip? Not a one of us, that's who. And yet, he continued to live his ever increasingly vaporous life, showing himself in dusty suits on high holidays, dispensing polite advice which would be interpreted as repetitious and senile echoes to our inattentive ears. The stiff old soul pulled out chairs, opened doors, and grew more enfeebled with every year we paid him no mind whatsoever.

Guilty feelings aside, it wasn't our fault that he died.

It is probably the news networks which bear the highest burden of Civility's death. What began as a routine colonic irrigation, took a dark turn when, in a bored moment, our eldest grand-uncle looked up to watch the television in his hospital room. Though the nurses cannot be completely sure, it has been conjectured that Carly Fiorina's demon sheep commercial triggered a mild stroke and then horrible nightmares thereafter. The second possibility raised was that the sight of Glenn Beck crying on Fox News caused a disturbance in his brain's blood supply. My vote goes to the former (hospital staff reported seeing an ancient man shudder uncontrollably at the stuffed toy lambs in the gift shop, thinking perhaps he was experiencing a seizure). The stroke weakened him considerably, and his flesh took on a more spectral pallor than usual.

Realizing his near end, he readied himself to visit his sister Grace to say his proper farewells – a kind-hearted yet foolhardy decision which caused his ultimate demise. By all accounts his sibling is two bottles of cheap vodka away from giving up the ghost herself. Surely, they would be enjoying each other's company in abundance before too long! Nevertheless, he purchased his ticket tout suite and packed his reasonable-sized carry-on luggage, umbrella and hat, ready for what he believed was his last cordial visit to Grace.

Unfortunately, Civility's prosthetic hip set off the metal alarms in airport security and he was asked to step aside for a more thorough examination by a large man named Luka. The shock of

being groped intimately by a corpulent, sweaty stranger proved too much for his fragile and genteel heart; it sent him into a cardiac arrest from which he did not return.

Of course, though we have ignored him for so long, we hope his rest is more peaceful than his final, frozen, horrified expression might convey, and that our ephemeral memories of him last.

Memorials may be sent to the home of his surviving nephews, Indignity and Lethargy.

Second Place

Patricia Argueza

It was my first time riding the 17. As I clinked seventy five cents into the ticket machine, the bus driver, who I eventually found was a former track coach and avid Lakers fan, brusquely asked “where are you transferring?” I quickly stammered “I transferred to Los Arboles because I didn’t want to go to Fitch” Sensing that I didn’t know what the hell a transfer was, he curtly handed me a ticket. Red from embarrassment, I slumped into the nearest seat, coincidentally next to the most talkative woman on the bus. In no mood to strike up a conversation, I ignored her greeting, leaning as far away from her as possible. Fifteen minutes later, the bus reached the corner of Boston St. and I bolted out the door. As I stepped out, the lady whom I sat next to yelled out “Kids these days! They don’t even know how to say thank you”

As the years passed by, bus drivers became a fixture on the route between home and school. I witnessed their best days: when Steve would hand out gum and Famous Amos cookies and when four foot tall Sandy heroically reduced Benjamin Havenstoke’s six foot ego to the size of a pea. I also witnessed their worst days: when Ramon nearly killed us all by speeding as he always did. Slowly but surely, I made a habit of saying thank you at the very least, to my drivers, who aren’t static robots, but human beings from a variety of backgrounds and with some of the most interesting stories to share with willing listeners.

En route to Los Arboles Middle School, Seaside High School, and presently, UC Berkeley, I’ve realized that civility isn’t manifested solely through actions, but one’s state of mind. True civility is realizing and considering the fact that human beings are constantly put at odds with one another in terms of needs and desires.

In spite of the rudeness of thirteen year old girls riding the bus for the first time, in spite of all the horror plastered upon the television screen, society is increasingly realizing its civility, especially within my generation. I witness young men and women standing up for the right not only to know the origin of their hamburger patties, but the rights of marginalized communities to fully participate in the world market, the rights of women to have a say in the government, and the right of children to be educated. I see individuals willing not only to give a pint of their blood in order to save a life, but sacrificing adolescence in order to nurture lives they’ve brought into the world. In short, there will never be an end of civility, because human beings always have the potential to realize it within themselves.

Second Place

Jing "Jonathan" Wong

I'm Fine, Thank You

As I saw my friend Katrina approaching from the other side of the corridor in Dwinelle, I raised my hand, "Hey!"

She looked up and greeted, "How're you doing, Jonathan?"

"I..." But before I could even register her facial features, my friend had lowered her head and hurried off. I stopped in my tracks and turned. The familiar silhouette grew smaller and smaller as my friend made her way further down the corridor.

But as she vanished around a corner, I stayed there, not moving a muscle.

Why did she run off just like that? I thought she was asking me something!

The scenario replayed a dozen times in my head as questions flooded my mind. What went wrong? Was it something I'd done that she couldn't look at me for more than a second?

A vivid scene crept into my mind. It was a summer day almost fourteen years ago. I was in an elementary school of my home-country – a place more than seven thousand miles away from Berkeley. Facing 40 kids whose combined English vocabulary could barely fill up two pages of a regular dictionary, my English teacher began the lecture by saying, "When people say, 'how's it going?', or 'how are you?', you should answer by saying 'I am fine, thank you'."

The way the class chanted "I'm fine, thank you" in unison still resonates in my head. Four words, four syllables. Yet, my friend didn't even spare me a second to say the first two!

Raised in a very different country, I've been hearing tales of the openness and enthusiasm Westerners demonstrate in everyday exchanges. Yet, my experiences reflected quite the contrary. And so, rather foolishly in retrospect, I grew disillusioned with the civility of Americans. After a while, I even stopped trying to muster a courteous smile every time I passed by people I know.

Finally, a day after almost two months of solitary life within the crowded Berkeley campus, I was approached by Abigail, a senior student in my class, "Hey Jon, may I...have a word with you?"

Her apparent uneasiness struck me hard.

"A couple other students of our research group had a small issue with you." She cautiously continued. "We're wondering if we did something that made you uncomfortable working with us. It seems that every time we..."

The rest is history. I was conceived as a bad-tempered person. This, in turn, is caused by my ill-conceived observations on my friends, and customs of Americans in general. I actually mistook

incivility as part of civility. It all comes down to misunderstandings materialized as cultures collide – rather than embrace.

After truly learning rituals including quick “sup”s, high-fives, fists bumps, and brief hugs, America became a much more civil place again. Collision, signified by misconceptions, marks the end of civility; but a warm embrace resurrects it.

Second Place

Alina Xu

This morning I am buying fabric at the market. It is my sixth month here: no longer a stranger in a strange land, I think. I navigate streets and conversations and pithy restaurant menus with more ease than I used to. I tell myself I know the norms, the codes of conduct, and sometimes repeat them to the less initiated, though I remain a foreigner and take pride in telling myself I have no false pride.

By the time I finish work each day the market stalls have closed their doors. But this morning before work I take a bus down to the sprawling marketplace, flush with the self-righteous pleasure of having risen early in order to buy some fabric. I approach a woman who arranges vivid bolts of cloth around her stall. We say our good mornings and I examine her wares. I hem and haw and ask a few questions and hold up fabrics at arm’s length and fold them back up. She hovers without appearing to hover. I decide that nothing really strikes my fancy. I communicate my decision in a euphemism and with a touch of apology, half turning to go.

She looks me straight in the eye. “That,” she says, “is not how we do things here. Every morning it takes me over one hour to come here from Tema. Some days, nobody buys. Every evening I pack everything up and go home, and the next day I do it all over again. If you come and look at my things, you must buy.”

I have upset the order of things; I stammer an apology and select my fabric, not without a few mental grumblings – whatever happened to the “Looking is free!” refrain I’d heard so many times from other vendors? – and am sent on my way. I wonder: what were her days like before adventure seekers, poverty tourists, over-privileged students, paunchy expats overran the city? Perhaps she was able to sell her wares with a bit more dignity than that afforded to her than by a insolent foreigner who wanders into her stall. Or perhaps each time it happens she rumbles disapprovingly and gives it little further thought, though today and for days to come the thoroughly humbled object of her reproof will turn over and over in her mind what has transpired.

Newly oriented with the proper mode of behavior in a market, but unfamiliar with the institutions and centuries of tradition that gave rise to it, I can only speculate. To presume wrongly would be as great a crime as to presume that your actions are acceptable when in reality, they violate some unwritten rule, some code of conduct previously unknown to you. Yet if civility is to be observed, this is a rule which there is no excuse for breaking. To engage constructively with some environment, whether in a foreign land or at the ballot box or in your own home, requires the courtesy of thoughtful, considered action. With the onset of presumption arrives the end of civility.